

RESEARCH ARTICLE

## **Women expatriate leaders: How leadership behaviors can reduce gender barriers**

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**Abstract** Multinational organizations that have integrated female expatriates into their leadership ranks have experienced a number of benefits; yet, many organizations are hesitant to send females overseas because they perceive that women will have difficulty in the cross-cultural environment. This study contributes to the limited body of work on female expatriate leadership and shows through phenomenological interpretation analysis of in-depth interviews with senior-level female expatriates from the U.S. government, how women expatriates can reduce gender barriers and successfully lead by employing specific leadership behaviors. These leadership behaviors, as expressed by study participants, include competence, display of respect, and listening. When employed together, these behaviors provide female expatriates an opportunity to gain trust, develop relationships, and socially deconstruct existing bias against women leaders.

**Keywords:** Female leadership; expatriate; cross-cultural environment; gender barrier

### **Introduction**

In today's global society, expatriate assignments have increased due to strong global competition, growth of overseas operations, and a requirement to transfer knowledge across international borders (Baruch & Altman, 2002). Often, the international experience that expatriates gain is used to prepare high-performance employees for senior management positions within the organization (Benson & Pattie, 2009; Bindi, 2016; Bolino 2007; Caligiuri & Tung, 1999; Varma, Toh & Budhwar, 2006). As a result, multinational organizations seek to find employees who are cross-culturally competent to send overseas, but have struggled to find personnel with the necessary skills to fulfill international assignments (Caligiuri & Cascio, 1998; Insch, McIntyre & Napier, 2008).

While organizations seek to fill critical overseas billets, many multinational organizations remain reluctant to send females overseas (Caligiuri & Tung, 1999; Moran, Harris & Moran, 2011). Although women have increased access to mid-to-senior level management positions, and the gender gap continues to narrow in the workforce, there remains a solid disparity between male and female expatriates overseas (Eagly & Carli, 2007). As a result, because of the limited number of females assigned overseas, expatriate assignments are referred to as the "second glass ceiling" for women leaders, because without these professional opportunities women may not have the experience necessary to compete with their male peers and move up the organizational ladder (Forster, 1999; Insch et al., 2008). While women have proven that they are equal to or more effective than their male counterparts in leadership positions (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Rosette & Tost, 2010) overseas' leadership opportunities remain infrequent.

Multinational organizations that have integrated female expatriates into their leadership ranks have experienced a number of benefits. First, they have a larger, more diverse, and experienced population to choose from to send overseas, versus those that limit the choice to only male expatriates (Adler, 1993). Second, organizations with a higher percentage of

women amongst the senior-management ranks outperform corporations with fewer or no women in similar positions (Coleman, 2010; Werhane, 2007). Third, the addition of women into leadership positions contributes to more transformational, ethical, cooperative, and collaborative work environments (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Perkins, Phillips & Pearce, 2013; Valentine & Rittenburg, 2007).

One arena that has frequently employed women as expatriates over the last 20-plus years is the U.S. government; however, limited if any research has been published on women expatriates in this sector. The U.S. State Department has sent women overseas for decades to operate in hundreds of embassies, consulates, and diplomatic missions. Since 9/11, the U.S. military has consistently sent female military members overseas for multiple purposes, to include combat roles, cultural engagement, and support to humanitarian operations. These government assignments can last anywhere from three months to three or four years. As a result, the U.S. defense sector offers an excellent pool of experienced female expatriate leaders to draw lessons from to inform multiple industries.

This paper seeks to contribute to the limited body of work on female expatriate leaders in overseas, cross-cultural environments. Through phenomenological interpretation analysis of in-depth interviews with senior-level female expatriates in the U.S. government, this paper posits that once overseas, women can reduce gender barriers and effectively lead by adapting to the culture by employing specific leadership behaviors in cross-cultural environments. These leadership behaviors include competence, display of respect, and listening. While these may seem obvious, these are nonetheless specific areas that the research participants identified which helped to break down gender barriers and effectively lead in cross-cultural environments.

## Literature review

*About the single most uncontroversial, incontrovertible statement to make about women in international management is that there are very few of them.*

- Adler, 1987, p. 169

## Gender

While there are multiple views and definitions of gender, this research study viewed gender through the lens of social constructivism, and examined how females experienced leadership based on their biology as women along with their social and cultural experiences. Van den Berg's (2011) definition of gender as an "embodied process that [is] enmeshed with the complex fabric of lived everyday experiences and concurrent socio-cultural and historical processes" (p. 385) is most applicable to this study.

In the context of this study, gender barrier is used frequently and refers to anything that prevents an individual from realizing their full leadership potential because of their gender. Eagly and Carli (2007) referred to this as a "concrete wall" when talking about overt barriers, and as a "labyrinth" when discussing subtle, or invisible gender barriers. These barriers can span from concealed individual bias, to legal constitutional practices. Regardless, however, most gender barriers are culturally constructed and exist in every society to some degree.

## Female expatriates

In the early 1980's, women filled less than three percent of the U.S. expatriate job assignments across all professional sectors (Adler, 2002). Over the next 20 years, the representation of female expatriates slowly grew to 13.9 percent (Tung, 2004). By 2005, women filled approximately 16.5 percent of all expatriate assignments (Altman & Shortland, 2008). While women have increased participation in management and professional ranks, the growth rate of female expatriates continues to be slow, and trails the growth rate of female leaders domestically (Tung, 2004). In the words of Tung (2004), "As long as women remain

under-represented in international assignments, they will continue to lack the opportunity to acquire one of the critical competencies required of global leaders” (p. 243).

The female expatriate experience has been referred to as the second layer of glass and the “expatriate glass ceiling”, and responsibility has been placed on both multinational organizations and female managers to break this second glass ceiling (Forster, 1999; Inch et al., 2008). First, multinational organizations need to recognize the value of diversification and fully integrate women as eligible, qualified individuals to fill overseas assignments. Second, without female representation, multinational organizations deprive themselves the benefits of increased diversity, and risk making poor economic decisions because their employees are too homogeneous (Inch et al., 2008). Third, females in lower-level management positions may perceive difficulty in achieving senior management positions, due to lack of international experience, and may self-eliminate from competition. To overcome these barriers, Females need to seek out social networks to assist with the expatriate process, engage in self-promotion, and express a desire to serve overseas (Inch et al., 2008).

In an effort to determine female expatriate success, Adler (1987) concluded after interviews with 52 female expatriates assigned in Asia, that 97 percent of the women had successful assignments in strong patriarchal, male-governed societies, where women held very few if any managerial positions. The women were both highly-qualified and educated; yet, in many cases, they had to convince their management to send them overseas. Nearly half of the females responded that being a woman in their position was more of an advantage than a disadvantage, and only 20 percent of the respondents considered being female a negative during their assignment (Adler, 1987).

Many women in Adler’s (1987) study reported that being a female provided them high visibility, and gained them easier access to host-country clients. In addition, a majority of the women exclaimed that Asians “assume[d] that the women would not have been sent unless they were “the best”, and therefore expected them to be “very, very good””(Adler, 1987, p. 183). The host country did not expect the women to behave like local women, but provided them a “foreign” woman status that exempted them from certain local cultural stereotypes (Adler, 1987).

Fischlmayr (2002) conducted a study to examine if self-perception was a barrier to female international careers. She reported that women failed to receive support from their organizations, and that gender stereotypes and traditional attitudes towards women were the main reasons why organizations did not send females overseas.

In an effort to understand the difficulties that senior-level females face in the international realm, Linehan (2002) identified four unique challenges that affect women expatriates: moving overseas with a male spouse; balancing the demands of an international career, relationships and raising children; the international relocation and repatriation cycle; and the impact of gender on the careers of the female expatriates. A majority of the female subjects felt that gender was a major barrier to their selection as international managers, and that social adjustment could be more difficult than adjustment within the organization (Linehan, 2002). While women may experience more difficulties than their male counterparts in overseas’ assignments, Selmer and Leung (2003) found no difference between males and females with regard to general adjustment. In fact, female expatriates displayed slightly higher interpersonal interaction and work adjustment than their male counterparts, while male expatriates reported a higher degree of psychological adjustment than female expatriates.

Janssens, Cappellen and Zanoni (2006) conducted a study to determine how female expatriates created identities that assisted in their overseas professional success. They interviewed 12 female expatriates that were considered successful, based on several criteria determined by the researchers, to include nomination by the females’ own organization. The researchers found that all female expatriates interviewed experienced some barriers in their positions related to hierarchy, culture, or gender. However, through in-depth recognition of

the situation, each female was able to position herself to succeed by employing individual sources of power to include expertise, experience, and relationships.

### ***The United States' defense sector***

Since 1973, when the Vietnam draft ended, women have increasingly gained access to leadership positions within the United States military. The gender gap within the military is significant and women fill only 12 percent of the Armed Services leadership positions (Benchmarking Women's Leadership, 2013). Within U.S. government agencies that actively support the U.S. defense sector, to include the State Department, women fill roughly 30% of the leadership positions (Benchmarking Women's Leadership, 2013). While the gender gap remains wide, within the government sector females are expected to serve overseas, potentially multiple times in their career, to be competitive for advancement. In this way, females in the government have greater access to overseas' leadership opportunities than women outside of the government.

### **Methodology**

The method employed in this research study was interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA), also known as hermeneutic interpretive phenomenology. The goal of IPA is to examine how people interpret particular life experiences (Smith et al., 2009). Phenomenological research strives to find the significance of episodes that may appear normal and part of everyday life. Phenomenological research focuses on homogeneous, typically small groups of individuals that have experienced or lived a similar phenomenon (Creswell, 2013).

The theory of IPA has three major influences. First, "the founding principal of phenomenological inquiry is that experience should be examined in the way that it occurs, and in its own terms" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 12). Second, hermeneutics is employed as the "theory of interpretation" in an effort to interpret the data provided. Third, idiography and "the particular" are strived for in IPA through both detail and in-depth analysis of the data provided by the participant (Smith et al., 2009). Together, these influences provide the foundation of IPA and help to discern IPA from other types of phenomenological research.

According to Smith et al., "in choosing IPA for a research project, we commit ourselves to exploring, describing, interpreting and situating the means by which our participants make sense of their experiences" (2009, p. 40). With this in mind, as well as the statement from Moustakas (1994) that "any phenomenon represents a suitable starting point for investigation" (p. 26), IPA was selected over other qualitative methods to answer the research question: How do female U.S. government employees experience their leadership in overseas multinational organizations?

First, IPA explored how females experienced being "female" in an overseas' organizations where there are fewer women than men, and where women often experience limited opportunities for leadership advancement (Eagly & Carli, 2007). Part of this exploration was to seek out how each woman experienced her environment, and how she professionally and personally adjusted to "being" female in the overseas male-dominated environment.

Second, analysis was conducted on how female leaders experienced cross-cultural environments. Analysis and interpretation was conducted on how the subjects experienced cultural adjustment and leadership in cross-cultural environments. "Although the primary concern of IPA is the lived experience of the participant and the meaning which the participant makes of that lived experience, the end result is always an account of how the analyst thinks the participant is thinking" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 80). This is defined as the double hermeneutic and is key to IPA analysis. In IPA, the researcher is not so much interested in how the participants answer the questions, but rather how to interpret their answers and explanations of the phenomenon they experienced. This is the true essence and

challenge of IPA research. While the researcher in this case also experienced this particular phenomenon, and though van Manen (1990) has stated it is acceptable to insert personal experience into an IPA study, the researcher chose to bracket their experience so that the subjects' experience was solely reflected in the interpretation of the data.

### ***Participants***

The following three criteria were used to select participants for this study: 1) They served in the U.S. government, to include any organization within the Department of Defense or the U.S. military, and; 2) They served overseas in a multinational organization, and; 3) They served in a mid-to-senior level leadership position. Fifteen women were invited to participate in this study; nine women agreed and were available to participate. All nine participants met the three criteria stated above. In an effort to protect the identities of the participants, pseudonyms were used and assigned as reflected in Figure 1.

After the participants agreed to participate, a face-to-face interview was set up between each subject and the researcher. Each participant was interviewed once. All of the women lived and worked in the Washington D.C. area, except for one who lived in Hampton, Virginia. Overall, the majority of the interviews went approximately 45 minutes with the shortest interview around 30 minutes, and the longest interview approximately one hour. Since a verbatim transcript of each interview was required for in-depth post interview analysis, the researcher electronically recorded every interview. The researcher reached data saturation after the seventh participant was interviewed; however, the remaining two participants were already scheduled and the interviews were completed and included in the data analysis.

The participants had extensive experience within the U.S. government as depicted in Figure 1. Of the nine participants, five had previous or current military experience at the time of their interview. Their time in the U.S. government spanned from 15 to 36 years, with an average of 28 years. With regard to overseas experience, the participants had an impressive array of travel and work that spanned the globe. Two women spent over half of their careers overseas, and every woman worked in more than one overseas location.

With regard to education, all participants possessed at least a master's-level degree, and three held law degrees. Seven of the nine women, at the time of the interview, filled senior or executive-level positions within the U.S. government. Three of the women interviewed were the first women in their professional field to reach their leadership position. In sum, this pool of participants is a rare group, especially amongst female expatriates.

Participants' Pseudonym	Military or Government Rank	Real-world Experience
Janet	Lieutenant Colonel	15+ years in the U.S. Air Force; Grew up overseas; Served in UN Mission in Democratic Republic of Congo
Diane	(2-Star) Major General	33+ years in the U.S. Air Force; Grew up overseas; Served in Afghanistan
Crystal	Minister Counselor	34+ years in the State Department; Served 16 years overseas: South Africa, Brazil, Mexico, Saudi Arabia, Somalia & Kenya
Helena	Director	23+ years experience; Government Contractor, USAID, Council of Foreign Relations; Served in Angola and Afghanistan
Laura	Deputy Undersecretary of Defense	36+ years in the U.S. military and as a civilian in Department of Defense; Served in Germany, Switzerland, South Korea, and extensively with NATO
Cathy	Ambassador	25+ years in the U.S. Government; Member of the National Security Council & Ambassador; Served extensively in Africa
Irene	FS-01 / GS-15	25+ years in the State Department; Served 12 years overseas: Russia, Croatia, Nicaragua, and Mexico
Felicia	(3-Star) Lieutenant General	28+ years in U.S. Army; Served in Germany and Iraq
Vivian	(2-Star) Major General	33+ years in the U.S. Air Force; Served overseas: Korea, Germany, Latin America, and Afghanistan

Figure 1. Summary of the research group

**Data analysis**

While IPA does not utilize a specific method or process to conduct data analysis, a thorough review of literature devoted to phenomenological analysis was conducted to establish an acceptable analysis process (Crist & Tanner, 2003; Moustakas, 1994; King & Horrocks, 2010; Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009; Tan, Wilson & Olver, 2009; and Van Manen, 1990).

After each participant interview, the researcher sent out the data for full transcription by a third party. Typically, full transcripts were available for initial analysis one week after each interview was conducted. In an effort to code the transcripts and determine themes, each full transcript was reviewed, highlighted, and written exploratory comments or emerging themes were provided in the margins. Emerging themes were reviewed against notes taken during the interview and interpretation analysis was provided in the margins of the transcript(s). An excel matrix was then completed to visibly display all subjects and the individual exploratory comments or emerging themes associated with them. The excel matrix was reviewed to determine the most prominent themes through visualization. Finally, each transcript was

reviewed again in its entirety, highlighted, and coded against secondary emerging themes with interpretation analysis.

During the data analysis and coding process, there were several instances when the researcher listened to the original audio recordings, to get better sense of how the women verbally responded in certain instances. This helped in applying Ricoeur's theory of interpretation, and ensured that the subjects' words and intent were not lost within the written transcript (Tan et al., 2009).

## Results

Overall, the data analysis revealed eight themes; however, for this article only one theme is discussed: How adaptive leadership and specific leadership behaviors can reduce gender barriers. Within this theme, the study participants found that cultural adaptation, along with competence, display of respect, and listening, were critical to their leadership success overseas. Over time these behaviors deconstructed existing gender barriers to their leadership and allowed them to effectively lead in the multinational environment.

Overall, seven of the nine study participants experienced negative reactions to their gender at some point during their expatriate experience; however, all seven found ways to get through these barriers and effectively lead in the expatriate environment. The majority of these barriers were socially constructed and existed within the cultures the women participants lived and worked in. The majority of the research participants completed several expatriate tours and discovered that cultural adaptation was critical to success in each one. The women also found that some countries were more difficult than others to adapt to, especially if one was unaware of the laws and customs of the country they reside in.

*[In Saudi Arabia] when we [women] were off duty, we had to wear abayas... I was in my abaya, I walked into the Wendy's with my compatriots and I was accosted and thrown out. Literally picked up, thrown through the door, landed on my back, in pain, hurting and I was being yelled at in Arabic because I had the audacity to walk through the front door versus the side/back door as a woman and family member. (Vivian)*

Most of the participants recognized early in their tours that they needed to adapt their leadership styles to be more effective in the expatriate environment. Also, they recognized that every expatriate environment presents new customs and values to become familiar with and adapt to. Instead of fighting the new cultures and customs and viewing the unfamiliar environment through an ethnocentric lens, the women embraced the idea of adaptation to the new cultures. Shaffer, Gregersen, Harrison, Black and Ferzandi (2006), found that cultural flexibility was a strong predictor of cultural adjustment. In this sense, Felicia and Laura's concept of cultural flexibility assisted their cultural adaptation in the expatriate environment.

*It's just that there are other people who do things in other ways and we have to be adaptable to be successful. (Felicia)*

*I have been spending more time going to the Middle East and that's just a whole different world than Europe. And so, I've been very, very circumspect about not putting somebody in a position where I shouldn't try to shake their hand if that's going to be a problem, and not taking personal offense of that, but realizing this is the custom here. (Laura)*

While almost every woman interviewed served in a different country and in a mid- to senior-level leadership position, every woman participant described moments of their expatriate assignment(s) as difficult, challenging, daunting, frustrating, or some similar

adjective. This is an important point, because regardless of the country they worked in, *each woman experienced a similar reaction to her gender*. The women not only had to overcome gender barriers, but also cultural ones, so that they could succeed in their organizational expatriate mission.

Each woman often had to diagnose the environment, which was different for everyone. Then, they needed to decide how to modify their leadership style to be more effective in the expatriate environment. The following dialogues describe how each woman internally recognized a need to alter their “Westernized” leadership style in the expatriate environment. Not every woman modified her leadership in the same way; however, every woman in the study responded that they had to modify their leadership style to be more effective. Helena took the approach that she was a guest in the country, and realized that she needed to adapt her leadership style, instead of expecting others to adapt to her leadership style.

*They wouldn't have respected me if I had come in with a Western leadership style as a woman. They were mostly men, Afghan men...They needed to be heard and seen, and they needed their perspectives heard. They needed some demonstration of – it wasn't that I was being less powerful, I just was a guest. I was a guest leader. (Helena)*

Most of the women in the study experienced how an American-centric view could be ineffective in the expatriate environment. Cathy and Crystal provide excellent examples of why ethnocentrism is ineffective in the expatriate environment, and can often offend or even alienate other cultures and nationalities.

*I think that Americans, in too many instances, tend to think that we are perfect and that our solution is perfect, and... it comes across as arrogance, and some people... in positions of leadership come across as arrogant, and then don't come across with a sense of humility... that can create... tension or problems between the people and the host government. (Crystal)*

*I think as you transition into someone else's culture, it's fundamentally important: just because they don't do it the way we do it doesn't mean it won't work. (Cathy)*

In an effort to be more effective as a female leader in the expatriate environment, Felicia and Janet found it necessary to take a more feminine approach to their leadership. This approach falls in line with Eagly's social role theory, where women are expected to act according to preconceived notions within their culture (Eagly, et al., 1995). As a result, Felicia and Janet shelved their egos, which are more acceptable in today's U.S. workforce, and adapted their leadership style to represent how the local, host culture expected women to behave.

*We have to adapt to the situation because our goal... is to achieve the nations' and state goal. And if that means that I have to shelve my ego in order to be successful, that makes me a good officer. (Felicia)*

*If you are going to be effective in a multinational environment and you are a woman, and you are dealing with countries that don't readily accept women, then the only choice you have is to make some concessions... If I have to sit on the floor because I'm a female... Just sit on the floor. You can still make your point from the floor. Don't be offended by that. (Janet)*

This study focused on the leadership of women in the expatriate environment. As such, it did not examine how effective each woman was in the expatriate environment. However,



since the women have returned from their overseas' assignment(s), six out of the nine women have been promoted, and one woman, Cathy, could not be promoted any further than her rank of Ambassador. The only women who were not promoted since their latest expatriate tour were Crystal and Irene; however, they both work for the U.S. State Department, serve overseas as Foreign Service Officers, and are both on track for promotion if they so choose in the future. As a result, it is assumed that their overseas leadership was effective, and will continue to be so as they move forward in their careers.

The following are behaviors that were identified by the researcher during data analysis that helped the female subjects transition past gender barriers in the expatriate environment.

### *Competence*

In almost any profession, competence speaks to an individual's capability in the work place. Is the individual intelligent? Do they display good judgment? Are they properly trained and skilled in their work area? To put it simply, to be considered competent, a professional must be reliable and able to successfully complete their work assignments. Helena, Laura, and Vivian found upon arrival to the host country that others questioned their professional competence in their organizations, until they had an opportunity to prove that they were competent. Once they proved they were competent, most of the overt gender bias, based on cultural norms, was removed. According to Adler's (1987) research on female expatriates, competence is necessary in order to earn respect from host nationals.

*I've gotten used to having to earn the respect of men... Their assumptions certainly aren't that I have a contribution... Usually, I have to prove. And so my new normal is I have to prove. And once I do, and it's in the proving that I feel pretty alive and because then, I articulate my value added. (Helena)*

*I went from being the outsider for two reasons: I was also the only Air Force leader that was in the Joint Task Force leadership role, and I was the only female. They went from treating me as an outsider to treating me as an equal that could actually handle a crisis in a wartime setting. And that then paid itself in spades as we went through that year. (Vivian)*

Helena and Vivian's comments support conclusions formulated by Sczesny et al. (2004), that gender stereotypes often have an influence on perceptions of leadership. As both women expressed, based on gender stereotypes, the assumption when they walked into the door was that they were not leaders. In fact, they were initially ignored, at least professionally. However, initial perceptions were shattered once the women were given the opportunity to perform.

*At the end of the day, it's about who produces the results, what they can do, how they go ahead and do what needs to be done... what was important was, what was the idea, what was getting done, were you credible. (Laura)*

*And so, in that moment, no matter what they might have felt about me otherwise, the one thing they always had for me was respect for me and my position as an analyst. That turned out to be very important. (Janet)*

Janet, unlike the other women participants, was considered professionally competent upon arrival. She was sent to the DRC specifically for her skill set, and was quickly able to display her expertise. Yet, even she discovered that the perception of competence was critical to her expatriate success.

**Display respect**

In a cross-cultural environment, displays of respect for the culture and the individual are critical. As discussed by Moran et al. (2011), an effective global leader, while aware of their cultural bias, does not enforce their own cultural expectations. Instead, they respect and embrace cultural differences in the workplace. According to Moran et al. (2011) this is one area that global leaders must succeed in order to be an interculturally competent leader. More important, for female expatriates, especially in cultures where women are expected to refrain from eye contact with males, sit against the wall versus at the table, cover themselves, or not make physical contact when greeting those of the opposite sex, displays of respect based on gender roles are critical to the establishment and maintenance of relationships. While men must also be aware of these displays of respect, females, especially senior leaders, must adapt their leadership to ensure they do not disrespect their host country and its cultural norms or expectations.

Cathy was an advisor to U.S. President George Bush, and learned how to engage respectfully with foreign heads of state. This was critical to her success as a U.S. Ambassador. Similarly, Helena, Irene, Felicia, and Janet all found that through sincerity and displays of respect, they were afforded an increased opportunity to participate effectively in the culture. Over time, this respect often developed into relationships, and the women found a seat at the table as an equal. In these instances, the women often had to place their ego and position to the side, and ensure that their respect was felt and their intentions were viewed as honest. The women also had to be cognizant of the culture, to ensure that their display of respect was well received.

*Being straight forward, being honest about what your goals are, and injecting a little bit of humanity into it, it works for me. (Irene)*

*It was very important for me to respect... He was an elder. And so more than just a respect for his position, but a respect for the person as an elder...We established a very close relationship where he then valued my opinion... because it became a mutual respect. (Felicia)*

*I realized very quickly that making them feel important and acknowledging their stature in some way – so ego stroking we would call that – right at the onset helped deflate some of the initial bad perceptions. (Janet)*

**Listening**

Ed Cohen (2007) identified in a Global Leadership Survey of world-class leaders that listening was one of nine leadership traits necessary for world-class success. While most of the research participants did not actively discuss listening in their interviews, listening was acknowledged by several women as critical to effective leadership in cross-cultural environments.

*I have a tendency to very quickly assess the situation and decide on a course of action and direct. In... many places in the world, that doesn't go over very well. Listening goes over really well... it is such a relationship builder to listen so even if I pretty much knew what I needed to know, I needed to demonstrate that active listening, even if I didn't get any new information, to develop the relationship that will ultimately let me do the leadership that I needed to do. (Helena)*

*It's important to listen, I think. I mean, I'm a take-charge kind of person, but it is fundamentally important to listen first and see what someone else has to say. Not always easy... I was most successful when I listened. (Cathy)*

Helena and Cathy are take-charge leaders; however, as expatriates they diagnosed the culture and understood that they needed to sit back and listen in order to be heard and effective as a leader. This indicates a high-degree of self-awareness and an ability to place one's natural leadership inclinations to the side, in an effort to succeed in a foreign environment. Listening also allowed the women the opportunity to pick up cultural nuances, gain buy-in, and display that they were genuinely interested in what others had to say about the issue at hand. While listening is a critical leadership skill, in the cross-cultural environment it is even more important, as it is necessary to gaining trust and understanding the views of the local culture.

## **Discussion**

When an expatriate, regardless of gender, enters a foreign nation to work, they must understand more than how their own country does business. They must also understand the national character of the foreign nation, accepted leadership practices, and cultural norms of the people (Moran et al., 2011). Furthermore, because women are more likely to operate as expatriates in countries that do not generally employ female managers, they must be attuned to how they will be perceived by the host culture. "Women, more so than men, not only need to understand cultural differences – but also gender differences that might be present in cultures that see a more traditional role for women" (Caligiuri & Cascio, 1998, pg. 398).

For individuals, understanding and meaning in the world is "formed through interactions with others and through historical and cultural norms that operate in individuals' lives" (Creswell, 2013, p.25). It is within this social construction that most, if not all, of the female participants in this study experienced bias against their gender. Over time every woman discovered through their experience that personal and professional adaptation to the host culture allowed them to alter their leadership behaviors in order to be more effective in the expatriate environment.

As discussed by Caligiuri (2013), agile global business leaders are able to "adjust their behaviors to the expected norm of the cultural context" (p. 175). These changed behaviors can often determine whether an expatriate achieves success or failure in their organization. As described through their own words, these women found that altering their leadership style often got them a seat at the table, where they could fully participate in the organization and exercise their leadership in the multinational context.

Most of the women found that they were sidelined when they first arrived to the host nation; several were not viewed as competent at all upon arrival, and did not have a strong support base. This is one of the many reasons that organizations fear sending women overseas. Yet, each woman in this study adapted to the culture, and gained respect as a leader within the first 90 days of their expatriate assignment. To do this, each woman had to be willing to modify their leadership behavior, and be open to the new culture and how their gender was perceived.

As presented in the findings, competence, display of respect, and listening helped the women to remove gender barriers. However, it is important to recognize that these leadership behaviors did not take place in a vacuum. Listening enabled the women to understand the culture and the organization, displays of respect demonstrated the women understood the culture, and then, after relationships were formed, and the women had the opportunity to prove their value, they were perceived as competent.

Once the women were perceived as competent and began to establish relationships, each of them felt as though gender barriers were dropped. That is not to say that every gender

barrier was removed as many of the women were still required to abide by cultural and social norms of their host country. However, in the work place, they were accepted as leaders, even though in most nations women are not socially recognized as such. As a result, these women found that they were able to socially deconstruct gender barriers and the perception of women as leaders through their own applied leadership behaviors.

The findings of this research suggest that organizations should not hesitate to send women overseas in expatriate roles; however, the women themselves should be prepared to be flexible and understand that their gender can create barriers in most cultures. This study, along with others that have researched female expatriate success (Adler, 1987; Caligiuri, Joshi, & Lazarova, 1999; Janssens et al., 2006; Selmer & Leung, 2003) have found that females can adjust and succeed in the expatriate environment. Where this study departs from the research that has been done up to this point, is how female expatriates can use applied leadership behaviors to break down gender barriers and create an environment where they can flourish as leaders.

## Conclusions

Today, most cultures and nations of the world remain unaccustomed to women in high-level leadership positions, especially within the military. As a result, many people have never set eyes on a high-ranking female officer, and in several nations, people are unaware that female general officers exist. Along the same lines, most men in foreign cultures are unaccustomed to engaging with females on business matters, or in peer-to-peer relationships. This behavior has been constructed over time as a cultural norm and expectation in many nations. This helps to explain why the majority of the women participants experienced overt bias in the beginning of their expatriate tour, but also why they were able to remove these barriers over time through competence, displays of respect, and listening. In fact, these expatriate women may have caused the first-ever “deconstruction” of gender bias that many of the foreign men and women they encountered had ever experienced.

As long as women remain on the sidelines and do not participate in leadership positions, most cultures will continue to exhibit bias against female leaders, because the social structure does not anticipate or advocate for women in leadership positions. However, an increase in female expatriates can increase the effectiveness of most organizations, and begin to “deconstruct” the social fabric that allows women to be overlooked and disregarded for leadership opportunities.

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